

Cleansing The Temple

Sermon for Third Sunday in Lent, March 15 2009

Rev. Franklin E. Vilas, D.Min.

“Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

What we have here is a real loss of temper and a rampage in a public place by Jesus of Nazareth. Those of us who have been brought up on stories of Jesus as a meek and mild human being must be in a state of shock when we hear of this dust-up in the temple. This is not the image of the gentle shepherd with the lambs and the children.

It is, rather, the image of a revolutionary so caught up in zeal for his faith that he resorts to violence to make his point. We forget some-times that the Jesus we meet in the Gospels is a very complicated human being. Fully as human as we are, he was capable of our entire range of emotions, including the rage, the anger that drove him to this public display.

What he saw that, as we might say, “drove him nuts”, was the abuse of a holy space for the purpose of making a profit. Jesus had a profound sense of the holiness of the One whom he called his Father, and it was out of this religious conviction and experience that he physically attacked those who in his eyes were desecrating the temple.

This Jewish teacher who venerated the law, and who saw it summarized in the law of Love, was expressing in his action a deep commitment to the covenants which had governed the religious history of the Hebrew people. Those covenants, as we have seen in previous weeks, were the agreements between God and His people through which their relationship was formed. We have considered this lent the covenant of God with Noah and the creatures of the Earth and the covenant with Abraham, whose faith made him the Patriarch of the nation.

Our Hebrew scripture today reflects the covenant which we know as the Ten Commandments, delivered by Moses on tablets from his experience with God on Mount Sinai. They represent the standards, the rules of behavior which marked the Hebrews as a special people. Their expansion and development by succeeding generations of rabbis and scholars form the basis of Judaism, from which Jesus emerged as the bearer of a new Covenant between God and the human race.

What the successive covenants of the years express is the growth and development of human knowledge and divine revelation about the nature of the universe and its Creator. This is particularly important to us in our day, in the first decade of the third millennium after Christ’s life and death.

We no longer live in the simpler and more pastoral world that Jesus walked. In recent centuries our knowledge of the true nature of our universe has exploded on the human scene. We no longer

believe that we are living on a flat piece of real estate, the heavens a dome overhead pinpointed with the tiny light of the stars.

We live instead in an expanding universe, with billions of stars and galaxies rushing away from an initial cataclysmic event which we know popularly as the “Big Bang”. Our Earth no longer is regarded as the center of the universe, but is seen as a tiny planet revolving around a sun in the corner of a galaxy we call the Milky Way.

The standards and the values which govern our behavior have changed and expanded as human history and knowledge has unfolded. Within the scripture itself, the law given to Moses is fulfilled and succeeded by the teachings of Jesus. In loving God and one’s neighbor as ones self, he said, hang all the law and the prophets.

These basic standards and values have governed the Christian church throughout two thousand years. Yet how they have been understood and interpreted has been greatly impacted by the state of our growing knowledge and the culture in which we live.

What does it mean now to sin? In past times, to steal was as simple as taking unlawfully something that belonged to another person. In our day whole economies have been ravaged by the greedy manipulation of vast enterprises that have led to obscene lifestyles for some, while robbing in the process the homes, the jobs, the lives and the futures of ordinary people.

How are we to judge these sins of such great proportion, when they reflect the common drive to succeed financially?

In our day actions against the Creation, against the Earth itself, which have ravaged natural ecosystems and led to the unprecedented extinction of species are recognized by the Vatican as well as by other world religious leaders as sins of the first order. For modern people, the definition of sin has evolved and changed, as people have sought to be true to the revelations of their religious history that continue until this day.

This expanding awareness of the nature of values in our day is reflected in the adoption by the national Episcopal Church and by our own Diocese of New Jersey of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations as a measure of our love of our neighbor in a complicated world.

Those Goals were published in our bulletin last Sunday, and they express an attempt on a global level to live out the summary of the Law delivered by Jesus. They include:

- 1) To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) To achieve universal primary education
- 3) To promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) To reduce child mortality
- 5) To improve maternal health
- 6) To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7) To ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) To develop a global partnership for development

These Goals are being recognized by religious groups the world over as a context for the expression of human compassion towards one another and to the entire created order. It is hoped that in our personal and collective ministries of stewardship and outreach we may be informed by this common effort to address the pain that is being experienced throughout the world.

With this understanding of the nature of goals and values in our time, we might ask ourselves where we would find Jesus today, wielding his whip of cords with zeal and attacking those who are desecrating the temple of life.

Most certainly we would see his temper expressed against those whose economic and political philosophies are harming the most vulnerable human beings—the children of the earth. In the zeal and the might of God we might find him overturning the tables in board rooms around the world, where decisions are made that result in poverty, malnutrition and diseases that kill and are preventable.

There would be short shrift for those whose greed and manipulation in recent years have brought such an economic crisis that it is global in nature. And most certainly there would be some anger left over to express against those who have desecrated the natural order, with no thought about the generations that will follow.

My friends, we are the body of Christ. Our discipleship calls us no less to zeal and action, to passion and purpose, to correct the practices and decisions that are destructive of human beings and natural life. These are the individual and corporate sins than we are called to address as believers in Lent of 2009. May we have the courage and the zeal to respond to the challenge, in the name of Christ.